On-farm animal welfare: Implementation of EU law

Animal welfare is an increasingly important issue for citizens, farmers and policy-makers. While European Union (EU) legislation sets high standards in this regard, assessment of its implementation shows that weaknesses persist in certain areas. The European Parliament’s Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI) has prepared a report on the implementation of EU legislation regulating animal welfare on the farm. A vote on the report is expected during the February 2022 plenary session.

Background

Over the years, the EU has established a considerable body of legislation aimed at protecting animal welfare. To ensure animal welfare on the farm, a horizontal directive lays down general standards for livestock protection, while specific acts cover the treatment of pigs, calves, laying hens and chickens. In 2012, the European Commission adopted an EU strategy for the protection and welfare of animals, listing action to address the gaps identified, including insufficient enforcement of the existing legislation by Member States.

Assessment of implementation

The EU’s animal welfare strategy brought many improvements, but an evaluation by the European Court of Auditors found that, while EU action was successful in some areas, in others, weaknesses related to welfare issues persist. In the farm-to-fork strategy adopted in May 2020, the Commission announced its plan to revise animal welfare legislation by the end of 2023, to align it with the latest scientific evidence. The plan included a fitness check of EU legislation on the welfare of farmed animals.

A European implementation assessment carried out by the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) in June 2021, to support the report prepared by the AGRI committee, evaluated the implementation of EU law on farm animal welfare and found some challenging areas. In addition, the study analysed the prospects for a possible introduction of animal welfare labelling at EU level.

European Parliament position

The AGRI committee adopted an own-initiative implementation report on on-farm animal welfare on 26 October 2021, with Jérémy Decerle (Renew, France) as rapporteur. Parliament’s Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) provided an opinion. The report addresses the implementation of EU animal welfare legislation, focusing solely on the five directives concerning the protection of animals on farms. Drawing on the conclusions of the EPRS study, the report notes that the current legislation is not consistently implemented throughout the EU, does not reflect scientific advances and does not cover all species. It calls for updated rules based on scientific data, impact assessments and a species-by-species approach, as well as for uniform implementation. It also reiterates its support for the European Citizens’ Initiative ‘End the cage age’ and urges that the issues of battery cages for laying hens, tail-docking of pigs, and piglet castration are addressed. It stresses that changes in legislation should take the farmers’ perspective and the competitiveness of the sector into account, and provide sufficient transition time and support. Regarding EU animal welfare labelling, the report advocates a common framework for voluntary labelling, with the possibility of a mandatory system in the future. The report was welcomed by farmers’ stakeholders, but criticised by animal welfare organisations.

Parliament is expected to vote on the committee report and a motion for resolution during its February plenary session.

Own-initiative report: 2020/2085(INI); Committee responsible: AGRI; Rapporteur: Jérémy Decerle (Renew, France).